

Volponi's Basement

Even today, just hearing the word "basement" still sends a slight shiver down my spine, even though it's been about 35 years since the events in my childhood memories occurred. The word "cellar" provokes a similar response in me, although to a slightly lesser degree.

In the movie "Donnie Darko", Drew Barrymore's character claims that a famous linguist (it was actually J.R.R. Tolkien) once said that the phrase "Cellar Door" is the most beautiful combination of words in the English language. Well, he was wrong for saying it in the first place, and she was wrong for repeating it and perpetuating the idea that the phrase is somehow beautiful. It's not. It's downright disturbing. *Fuck THAT*, and fuck HER, and fuck THAT MOVIE and fuck TOLKIEN (even though I really did actually like the movie, and Tolkien). Fuck ALL of them right up the rear end for using that phrase.

"Cellar Door" is, to me, one of the scariest possible combination of words.

Another goon (stinkles1112) posted a 'basement' description earlier, which seems very apt - I'd like to quote an excerpt from that post:

"Also, there was a basement which had the whole "evil presence" thing going on. My mother flat out refused to go in there after the first time she did, and that was during broad daylight. My father only did with the door open and every light in the vicinity on. I remember vividly the feeling of abject terror I felt the one time, to my memory, that I went in there, not the kind of scared you feel when you're a kid and your mom turns the light out and shuts your room door, but the kind of scared you feel when every horror movie you've ever seen comes to life and coagulates in the form of suffocating, total darkness punctuated by a hundred eyes all staring at you with a deep burning hatred."

This is a very good (if understated) description of the feelings invoked. There are some differences; stinkles' basement was cold and seemed to affect everyone, while mine was warm and only affected children. Still, there are enough similarities to make me wonder if our basements may have been siblings born from the very same hell, or perhaps they were even connected at a deeper level; some twisted "dionaea basement" in which each of them was only a small part of a larger entity.

OK, That's enough of that particular rant - Here we go, to the much longer ranting....

It's going to be a long story, filled with many irrelevant details that serve no real purpose other than to demonstrate how clearly I remember it; how it has burned itself into my mind.

I don't know how many of you are prepared to read the rambling, incoherent ravings of a madman recounting events from the lunacy of his childhood memories, so at this point you have two choices:

- (a)* Skip my post and proceed to the next one; there is no "tl;dr"
- (b)* Sit back, relax, settle in, and prepare yourself for the ride.

Introduction & back-story

As I mentioned before, my basement story is along the same lines as the "evil presence" mentioned in the post I quoted above. It's quite a bit more complicated than the other basement story back on page 3, where Crotch Apples reported hearing strange noises only to discover that the noises were the result of a brother making out with girls.

I'm not saying that there weren't strange noises - there absolutely were, although just how strange is debatable. In retrospect, they may have been (and probably were) perfectly mundane "basement noises", but they did add an element of extra

creepiness.

Noises like the occasional erratic metallic "clink" or "thunk" sound of pipes being tapped on. A steady "bloop" at about 10-second intervals, suggesting a drip from some unseen leak. The sound of rushing water. All of those were likely just plumbing issues. Less frequently, I would hear a low 'moaning' sound, which quite probably was just wind somehow entering from outside, or circulating in some plumbing vents.

Looking back, there are many completely rational explanations for such noises, and it's likely that every old basement in every old house makes noises like these. At the time though, in my young mind, they were unfathomably ominous warning sounds. The erratic "clink" and "thunk" tapping noises were intentional, and were designed to stimulate my curiosity; drawing me down into the basement to investigate. The dripping "bloop" noises were maddeningly loud - much louder than they had any right to be - and were similarly intended to lure me down in the hopes of shutting off whatever infernal faucet was open. The rushing water noises only served to confuse me, but the moaning....

Oh, the moaning - Thankfully, it wasn't as constant as the tapping or the drip, but nevertheless it was horrific. It both drew me and repelled me at the same time. I didn't know if it was the call of someone who needed my help (perhaps the last victim who had made the unwise decision to enter that pit), or if it was a chorus of all the voices of previous victims, warning me to stay away.

To make it worse, none of the noises sounded entirely real - They all had an artificial quality, like sound-effects from a movie - Like shaking a piece of sheet-metal to re-create the sound of thunder, or clapping coconut-halves together for the sound of a horse galloping. I could never (and still can't) quite place my finger on it, but something about the noises was always very "off." The "not-quite-right" feeling inherent in the sound may have been due to the shape/acoustics of the room. All sounds coming through the door from below the staircase seemed to be amplified, and a short echo/delay ambiance was applied before the sound waves

reached my ears.

I didn't understand concepts like "acoustics" at the time. Maybe the alteration of the sounds were simply due to acoustics of the room, causing the sound waves to resonate in such an unusual fashion....

But then again, maybe the sounds were altered intentionally to disguise their artificiality. Hearing the noises through the open door at the top of the staircase created the feeling that the noises just somehow didn't belong. As if they had actually originated from some other source, elsewhere in the universe, but had been transported into the basement through some rift in space-time. When the door was shut, the noises could (mercifully) no longer be heard at all. The door didn't muffle the noises, but canceled them out altogether.

The story begins...

During my childhood, my family moved around a lot. My father worked for a government agency that would transfer him to different locations on a fairly regular basis. Every year or two, we'd be in a different city or state, moving into a new home.

I was probably about 7 years old when we moved into the house with "the haunted basement." Perhaps "haunted" isn't even the right word to use - It was never really clear to me whether the basement itself was alive, or if something else, something very evil, was residing within the basement. I suppose the distinction is meaningless, because whatever it might have been, it's energy was always focused in that one particular part of the house.

I'm not certain exactly when, how or why I came to the conclusion that it was haunted. Only that it terrified me to my very core.

At some point within the first week of moving into this new house (before I had become aware of IT), my natural inclinations toward

exploring led me toward the basement, just to play around, as children are often wont to do. At the time, the basement was new to me - it was (in my mind) "unexplored territory," and I was a discoverer.

I was a young child, and I didn't know any better - It wasn't until much later that I realized it's a bad idea to intrude into areas where something might prefer to be left alone - a sleeping beast is best left undisturbed - once awoken, the beast will behave in a manner consistent with it's beastly nature.

Whatever force it was, it had decided I was unwelcome, and I somehow, instinctively knew it didn't want me around. I got the impression that it didn't like me very much at all - or perhaps it did. Maybe it liked me a little too much.

The door to the basement was just outside of the kitchen, in a small utility room/entryway around the corner from the pantry closet. The door's handle was on the left, and hinges on the right. It opened inward toward the stairs, where there was about a 4-foot long platform before the staircase descended along the left wall. Thinking back on it, this was a pretty poor design and potentially dangerous to someone who might have been coming up the stairs. The door opening at the wrong moment could easily knock someone down the staircase, or plummeting over the railing. Of course, I never thought about such things at the time. There was a light-switch on the left wall just inside the door.

From the doorway at the top of the staircase I couldn't actually see much of the basement, even if I flipped on the light-switch. The light illuminated the stairs well enough, but not much of the basement itself. That godforsaken room seemed to be shrouded in perpetual darkness. I could just barely make out the shape of the washing machine at the far right of my field of view.

The basement stank, as well. Standing atop the stairs, I could smell a very unpleasant musty odor and feel hot, dank air emanating up from within those murky depths. I could also feel a presence, like it was both sentient and secretive. It knew

something I didn't, and it wouldn't reveal its dark secrets unless I went down and succumbed to its clutches. At times, it seemed only to be playfully mischievous, trying to coax me in. At other times there was no mistaking that its basement had wicked, malevolent intentions.

I never actually even set foot inside it; I was too frightened. Just looking down into it, I could feel the small hairs all over my body standing on end, as if even my very skin could sense the danger that lurked within that subterranean crypt, awaiting my arrival. I distinctly remember standing in the doorway at the top of the stairs, staring down into the emptiness, the dark abyss of the unknown and unknowable, desperately trying to muster up enough courage to descend into what I was convinced must be a magical portal to some other world; simultaneously wondrous and terrifying.

I could never do it. Fear would paralyze me before I could take even the first step down that foreboding staircase. I would stand there in complete and utter horror, sweating, on the verge of tears, until eventually something would snap and I'd regain just enough control of myself to run away. And run, I did. Every single time.

Eventually, my fear of the basement (and whatever unimaginable evils lurked within) extended to even the doorway which led to that monstrous room. I began to avoid even the door to the basement, as if getting too close to the door would cause me to be sucked in, where I would surely suffer unspeakable atrocities. I would do my best to keep at least five feet away from that malignant, venomous doorway.

Friends visiting

Much like any other child, I had friends who would come to visit, play, or have the occasional sleepover. On a few occasions (when my parents weren't around, or weren't paying attention) I would

dare my friends to enter the basement. None of them ever did. I never told them exactly why the basement was a scary place (and to be honest, I really didn't understand it myself - I still don't).

They all seemed very willing to take the dare, but as they approached the door they always faltered. One of them (Paul) came closer than most; and (admittedly) closer than I ever had - He walked down the stairway to /almost/ the halfway point, where he froze. Solid. After a moment, he turned and bolted back up the stairs. He didn't stop once he reached the kitchen, either. He kept running straight through, and locked himself in the bathroom for 10 or 15 minutes. When he finally came out he was sweating, shaking all over, and unable to maintain eye-contact - with anyone - for the rest of the night. He refused to talk about it.

My parents seemed to think that he might be ill, and they called his parents to express their concerns. I don't know exactly what transpired in that phone call, but I guess it was decided that everything was OK, because Paul's parent's didn't come pick him up. At least, not right then.

In the middle of the night, Paul woke me up and said that he had to go home. I told him to shut up. I wanted to go back to sleep. He started crying and babbling about wanting to go home. After a little while, the noise woke my parents up. It was tremendously embarrassing to me - I was sure they'd never allow another sleepover after this kid woke them up in the middle of the night with his blubbering. After all, he was my friend, I was the one who invited him here, and now he's causing problems, interrupting their sleep. They told me it was OK, sometimes kids get scared for no reason. They said the best thing to do would be to let him call home, and maybe it would help him to feel better.

My father made the phone call. He woke Paul's mother, and explained (as best he could) the situation to her. Then he gave the phone to Paul. Paul immediately started crying, the moment the phone was put into his hand. He begged his mother to come pick him up, that he needed to go home... I can still hear the tone in his voice, and the way he stretched out the vowel "e" in the

word "need" and the "o" in "home". He told us all that was feeling sick, but he couldn't look any of us in the eye, and I could see the look of abject terror on his face. I knew it was the basement that had frightened him away from my house. I felt bad for daring him to go down there. He wound up gathering the few belongings he had brought with him, and my father drove him home.

Paul and I never spoke much after that - It was almost like we weren't friends anymore, for some reason. Over the short course of time that I lived there, I'd see him at school and he'd usually avert his gaze, as though there was some unspoken thing which he didn't want to acknowledge. In any case, we were never really friends again after that, he seemed to get very uncomfortable around me and distanced himself - In fact, I don't think I ever saw him have any friends at all for the rest of the time I went to school there.

[unrelated side-story]

It's not really pertinent to the story, but a few years ago, my mother sent me an email containing a web-link to a news story about Paul - She'd stayed in contact with his parents throughout the years. As it turned out, Paul had grown up (as we all do), married a very nice woman, and had 2 children. He also got a job as a schoolteacher in the same town and school district where I first met him.

Apparently at some point while he was teaching third-grade students, Paul developed an unhealthy liking of 9-yr-old girls. One of his students had come forward with allegations of molestation, and she was quickly followed by several other girls he had taught. While he was awaiting trial on multiple charges, he died from a self-administered rapid overdose of lead poisoning delivered directly to his brain via the barrel of a shotgun.

[/unrelated side-story]

Grown-ups didn't know

Judging from the reactions of every single one of my childhood friends who ever came into close contact with the basement, we children seemed to be (in some fashion) attuned to the presence of whatever was lurking within it. We could sense it, even though adults were entirely unaware of it, and thus unaffected.

My parents never showed any signs of being frightened by the basement at all. I never mentioned my fear to them for a variety of (completely illogical and nonsensical) reasons that I'll attempt to explain later.

Occasionally, I'd see my mother coming up from the basement; usually carrying a hamper full of clean laundry. I was in complete awe of how courageous she was, to have willingly gone into (and surprisingly, returned safely from) that abomination beneath the house. I don't recall ever seeing her enter the basement, only seeing her return. I may have just "blacked-out" any memory of seeing her enter, as the thought would have been too traumatic for my young mind to cope with.

I'd like to think that if I'd seen her entering that dreadful tomb, I would have warned her not to go, even pleaded with her if necessary. Truth is, I probably wouldn't have. I would probably have been too afraid to voice my objections, knowing that the basement might hear me. I knew that it was evil, and I knew that it was dangerous, yet I had the suspicion that just maybe, it didn't know that I knew. Somehow, my intuition told me that I'd be safer if I didn't let it find out that I knew about it. As long as it didn't know I was aware of it, I could avoid it - but if it found out that I knew, it would have to get rid of me.

For the rest of the time that we lived in that house, I avoided that door like some demonic infectious disease that was absolutely, without-any-doubt, determined to destroy me (or worse). As I said before, I didn't mention my fear to my parents or anyone else. Using my childhood logic, saying it out-loud might awaken "the

bad thing" and bring it directly to me, like some unearthly spectral dog-whistle. It seemed to be confined to the basement (for now), perhaps it was even trapped there and unable to come out. Speaking of it aloud might be like "calling it's name", which could free it from it's underground prison and allow it to come for me. I tried my best to hide my fear, because I somehow knew that if my parents found out about that fiendishly diabolical and loathsome entity, then the basement would be forced to deal with them, as well. As old superstitions go, saying something out loud calls it to you, and telling someone else brings it to them.

Looking back on it, I suppose they had to know how frightened I was even though I never told them. I don't think they could have possibly not noticed how consciously I avoided that door, and how quickly I moved when I did have to walk by it.

Relief at last

After about a year, we moved out of that house and to a different state. I still remember that basement (well, what little of it I ever actually saw) in great detail, and I'll never forget how I would become consumed by sheer terror whenever I came into close proximity to it.

Update - More recent times: A couple of years ago while I was visiting my mother, we were talking and something reminded me of all this. I don't remember what, exactly. I don't even remember what the topic of conversation was at the time, most likely something inconsequential, but something she said, or something I said, or perhaps something on TV reminded me (all it usually takes is hearing the word "basement").

In an off-handed sort of way, I mentioned it to her. I don't remember exactly what I said, but I remember being shocked by the way she reacted to it. What I said was probably something mostly innocuous, like "remember when I was little, how scared I was of the basement".

She just stared at me blankly, with a very strange look on her face, and didn't say anything all. After a few seconds (not your usual 'few seconds' - these were seconds that felt like days, or perhaps weeks - timeless, infinite seconds during which I became increasingly uncomfortable), when the silence had reached a deafening crescendo and my discomfort level had peaked, I tried to change the subject. She wouldn't allow that. To my horror, she only stared at me quizzically and asked me to repeat myself. The remainder of the conversation proceeded something like this:

"What did you just say?"

"Ah - mmm, nevermind, it's nothing - just thinking out loud."

"No, you weren't - What did you just say?"

"I'm going to get another cup of coffee - do you want one?"

"Stop avoiding my question - I want to know what you meant - Something about the basement?"

"It's not important, really"

"Tell me."

"I was just saying how much it scared me when I was little."

- [blank stare from mom] -

"I was really glad when we moved out of that house."

- [blank stare from mom] -

"It's silly, I know."

"We've never had a basement."

Of course, I didn't believe her. I even argued with her a little. I

described the door, the stairway, the noises... All to no avail.

I tried reminding her of the night that Paul came for a sleepover, and how he had awoken so frightened that he refused to stay - she remembered the night, but she insisted that Paul had just gotten sick.

I mentioned that the laundry machines were in the basement - She simply had to remember it; she'd been down there many times. She refused to hear any part of it - She remembered the small utility room outside the kitchen, but according to her, the laundry machines had been located in that room, and there was no door leading to a downward staircase. After a very frustrating conversation, it seemed that there was simply no way I would ever be able to make her remember, and she seemed to give up on trying to convince me.

Later that evening, she brought out an old photo album. She sat down with me and went through photos of every house we had lived in while I was growing up. Photos of every location we had ever moved to, every city and state. She could tell me what years we lived in each home and how old I was at the time. She wanted me to point out which house I was talking about. I couldn't identify which particular house it had been. Although I could narrow it down to two possible houses based simply on my age at the time, neither one of them looked like the right house from my memory. The pictures were all familiar to me, I remembered the houses, but I couldn't place precisely which one of them it had been since none of them looked quite right. She could narrow it down to one particular house; being that it was the town where we had met Paul's family. She swore that it didn't have a basement, nor did ANY home we'd EVER lived in.

Conclusions

I sometimes wonder if perhaps the basement managed to somehow erase itself from her memory - Of course that would

mean that it had altered my memory as well, rendering me unable to identify the house in which it dwelt, and thus preventing me from ever disclosing it's whereabouts.

I try not to think about it too much, or too often, and I've once again decided that I probably shouldn't ever tell this story out loud.

Rationally, I realize that there's no real danger in vocalizing any of this, but a part of me still thinks that there just might be. I have nothing to gain by saying it out loud, but I also stand to lose nothing by remaining silent about it just in case it can still hear me.